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REVIEW: *EARLY CARPETS AND TAPESTRIES  
ON THE EASTERN SILK ROAD*

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Gloria Gonick. 2016. *Early Carpets and Tapestries on the Eastern Silk Road*. Woodbridge: ACC Artbooks. Foreword (John E Vollmer), Wutun Paintings (John E. Hatherley). 172 pp, 6 maps, 200 illustrations. ISBN-10: 1851498109, ISBN-13: 978-1851498109 (hardcover, USD70).

Gloria Gonick's book is the result of a series of detailed studies of some of the surviving Chinese Manichaean textiles, both in Japan and China.<sup>1</sup> It has an ambitious composition and offers much more than the title announces.

Less glamorous and more tribal than the many more studied luxury textiles, a mysterious group of thirty-six early painted tapestries and twenty-one carpets - all woolen - forms the focus of this study. They have been kept in Kyoto since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as part of the local Gion Festival floats' decorations and have until recently been understood as ink-painted tapestries from Korea and regional wool-pile carpets from western China. Indeed, the Japanese notion of the tapestries as Korean made perfect sense in so far as the Japanese having acquired them largely from Korea in centuries past.<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is worthwhile to mention Thomas

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<sup>1</sup> This is a book length, expanded version of her research, drawing in parts on her previous papers on early Chinese Manichaean textiles held in Kyoto as well as those produced later on the southern coastal China in Fujian; see Gonick (2009) and (2014), respectively.

<sup>2</sup> The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) outlawed Manichaean religion and banned its trappings. Consequently, most of the textiles were collected and destroyed, with some sold to foreign, Korean and Japanese traders. Thus the

Cole, who argues for a change in focus on Tibetan rugs from the conventional references to both Chinese and Buddhist influence. Instead, he suggests that the Tibetan weaving tradition should be viewed in a Central Asian tribal context.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gonick looks for the provenance beyond Korea and successfully traces all of these textiles back to Gansu in China. This new provenance is a significant contribution of her study. Another is contextualizing the textiles within the Manichaeian religion and the material culture it gave rise to. It is these textiles, seen and understood at long last as Manichaeian relics, and preserved in China and Japan, that are the subject of her book.

After a glowing foreword by John E Vollmer – an internationally recognized curator and scholar in the fields of Asian art, textiles, and dress – and Gonick's own brief introduction, which both (to lesser and greater extent, respectively) set out the premises of her research and give the bold outlines of her theory, the book is divided into total of thirteen chapters, most of them quite short.

The ambitious and intricate structuring results in a measure of fragmentation and repetition in the presentation of the material, as well as back-and-forth or unexpected shifts of foci. This is especially the case when ideas are introduced or facts mentioned in passing, yet the designated chapter for a more detailed discussion is located elsewhere in the book.

Gonick's narrative begins in Japan: Chapter One looks at the Gion Festival textile collections in Kyoto and places them in their Japanese cultural context. It discusses these textiles as a whole, the ways they arrived in Japan and how they were subsequently used, and in many cases recorded and studied - except for the two groups of textiles the present book deals with.

Since the links between these enigmatic textiles and Manichaeian influence are mentioned in both the foreword and the introduction, Chapter Two opens on the Chinese mainland with its point of departure being the Uighur migration in the eighth century

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merchants of Kyoto were able to acquire some of the latter, and have used them ever since to adorn their annual Gion Festival procession.

<sup>1</sup> See Cole (1990) and (2004).

from Mongolia to western China, especially the area around Turfan in Xinjiang.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, these Uighurs were Manicheans. Likewise, designs on both the pile carpets and the ink-painted tapestry textiles preserved in Kyoto reflect the beliefs of Mani - similar to the manner in which Buddhist textiles attest to the story of the Buddha. In these textiles there are also references to Tibetan-style Buddhism, and later on to both Daoism and Manichaeism. Thus a sequence of influences is established and linked to historical circumstances that gave rise to them: first the original arrival of the Manichaeian Uighurs, subsequent contact with the ethnic Tibetan population and their religion in the Qinghai-Gansu region, and finally the merging of Manichaeian motifs with Daoist ones from the Ming Dynasty onwards, when Mani's "Religion of Light" was outlawed and under state persecution.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter Two then turns to the state of studies, past and present, of ancient Manichaeian Uighurs and their culture as well as their cultural heirs and descendants down to the present-day – the Monguor.

Whereas Manichaeian relics from the Turfan region and Dunhuang are well known, those produced further southeast in the Qinghai-Gansu area (i.e., the Yellow River region, an appellation that describes it well as regards Gonick's work) have received scant

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the discoveries of remains of Manichaeian works of art in the Turfan region by the German expeditions in 1902-1914 has been discussed in several accounts. For a recent study on Chinese influences of Uygur Manichaeian Art, see Gulácsi (2003); especially, as the Chinese tradition disclosed itself notably in textiles and wall surfaces, as opposed to illuminated manuscripts in the Persian tradition.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, by the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), Manicheans in the Chinese eyes had become indistinguishable from Nestorian Christians. This disappearance tallies with the notion that Manichaeism died out in China between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet there seems to be nothing that would give rise to the Qing perception in surviving Manichaeism material culture, unlike in some of their beliefs and practices, for Mani had included aspects of Christianity into his theology in a bid to be all-inclusive. This is similar to Tibetan Bon followers adopting many aspects of mainstream Tibetan-style Buddhism in order to survive persecution by the latter. The Manicheans employed Daoist artistic tradition in their art and artifacts from the Ming to today for comparable reasons.

attention.<sup>1</sup> This book thus attempts to redress this imbalance in charting and analysis.<sup>2</sup> What makes any researches into the Uighur past a highly problematic and contentious topic are the current tensions between the Han Chinese and the contemporary Uighur population in China.<sup>3</sup> This is further exacerbated by the contemporary Han notion that the culture as well as the area in this regard is lacking in interest.<sup>4</sup>

This, in turn, shifts the attention to the Monguor (discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine) as descendants of the Manichaeans Uighurs of the Yellow River region and the conquering Mongol soldiers in the early thirteenth century. As Gonick notes: 'The temples, textiles, and the paintings and sculpture they bequeathed to the area reveal today their Uyghur Manichaean inheritance, and provide unique, mostly unexplored body of art.'<sup>5</sup> This understanding is significant throughout the book. It may also to some measure explain the unexpected ending with the Wutun paintings (Chapter Thirteen); as well as the choice of much of the visual material in the survey of Manichaean motifs in the Yellow River region (Chapter Seven).

Chapter Three takes us back to Japan and Kyoto anew with the enigmatic textiles, which are now discussed in some detail for the first time. This is perhaps the most fascinating and substantial single chapter, which analyses the materials and techniques, and discusses

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<sup>1</sup> Gulácsi's study (2003) also concentrates on the finds in the Turfan region.

<sup>2</sup> Gonick (2016:21-22).

<sup>3</sup> This may be a moot point since the arts and artifacts of the present-day Islamic Uighur in Xinjiang bear no resemblance with those of their Manichaean ancestors or the Monguor in Gansu.

<sup>4</sup> This may have less to do with Han chauvinism, and more with the cultural demarcation lines that posit the Yellow River region as a location for things Tibetan and Tibetan-style Buddhism, thus effectively marginalizing, if not excluding, any interest in Manichaeism or the present-day Uighur and Monguor. On the other side of the line lies Dunhuang and Turfan/Bezeklik, which are presented above as sites of Buddhist art, and the focus continues to rest heavily - notably in the case of Dunhuang - on the ancient texts found that the Chinese consider as pre-eminent cultural relics for age-old cultural reasons.

<sup>5</sup> Gonick (2016:21).

motifs while presenting along a visually enhanced view of the pieces referred to. Indeed, the 200 images throughout the book are well chosen, illuminating, and of high quality. The captions are also informative. The painted tapestries are covered first, followed by the pile rugs. While the tapestries reflect Manichaean tradition and ways of use, the rugs are more closely associated with Chinese and Tibetan-style Buddhist imagery and functions.

Interestingly, the Tree of Life depicted on some of these rugs<sup>1</sup> recall the Central Asian influences on Tibetan carpets traced by Cole.<sup>2</sup> Gonick's consideration of color is also of interest. First the Uighur and then the Monguor favored particularly red-orange hues.<sup>3</sup> These are in marked contrast to the Mongol preference for blue and yellow, or the use of the Xinjiang red by latter-day Uighurs, both in their own carpets and many of those intended for the Tibetan market.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter Four returns to the question of provenance in order to corroborate Gonick's theory. Several purported sources for the textiles are presented and convincingly rejected - Korea, Tibetan Buddhist regions, the Mongols - before returning to the Uighurs of old. Gonick also describes her attempts to discover some lingering traces of the Manichaean Uighur past in the Yellow River region, but these are largely unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Gonick (2016:46).

<sup>2</sup> Cole (1990, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The red-orange color, obtained from safflower, is used for the background of the piece. Upon it, as in the case of the tapestries, was a brilliant multi-colored riot in vibrant shades of red, blue, gold and green, as well as in pink and turquoise - though now all faded. The same palette can be found in Uighur murals and paintings on paper and silk as well as on religious edifices. Gonick singles out the elaborately carved and decorated Chone (Zhuoni) Monastery in Gansu (2016:71-75), but it was likely present also on stately and princely structures.

<sup>4</sup> Notably the tiger carpets for the Tibetan market made in Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang).

<sup>5</sup> She does make reference to a mandala on the wall at the Luqu Shitshang Monastery (Xicang Si, Luqu) in Gansu. Unfortunately, the book contains no image of this. Her reasoning that this would have been executed by Uighur artist(s) is plausible; certainly Tibetan-style woodcarving in Labrang/Xiahe

Chapter Five continues to investigate the provenance of the Kyoto tapestries in particular, while discussing ink-painted tapestries in China in general. The Gansu Provincial Museum in Lanzhou holds similar textiles similar to the Kyoto ones, and it is surmised by Chinese scholars that they may have originated from Qin'an, near Tianshui in Gansu.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter Six discusses Mani and the "Religion of Light" he founded. This appellation is somewhat misleading, for Manichaeism is above all a belief in the duality of darkness/evil and light/good, even if the worship and protection of the latter is a central theme in Manichaean theology. Moreover, these characteristics of light and dark can be observed in nearly all aspects of Manichaean material culture. In terms of the ink-painted tapestries discussed in Gonick's study, the Manichean themes are expressed through the repetition of images depicting the struggle between light and dark.

Chapter Seven is a straightforward art historical discussion of Manichean motifs in China and those depicted on the Kyoto textiles. Discussed are, among others, the curly grass motif, the Tree of Life, guardian dogs, and the peacock. Curly grass and the guardian dogs are both Buddhist and Chinese as well as Tibetan motifs. The Tree of Life has its provenance in Central Asia. The peacock, in turn, is the most prominent and ubiquitous of Manichean motifs, and Gonick presents an intriguing array of peacock motifs, drawn mostly from the Tibetan Buddhist context.

Chapter Eight is a brief taking stock halfway: an open-ended summing up around a central theme. Gonick begins it with a list of pertinent points and unanswered questions, which remain unanswered as far as what she has established to this point, apart from the Kyoto textiles not originating in Korea. The chapter has a piecemeal quality. After an interlude of remarks related to her fieldwork, she moves beyond China, listing museum collections with ink-painted tapestries the world over. The contents are all valid, but

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for instance is now done by Han Chinese from out of town, and not by Tibetans.

<sup>1</sup> Gonick (2016:68-70).

the presentation lacks depth. Only in Moscow does she find confirmation for her theory as regards tracing the provenance of the textiles to the Uighur.

Chapter Nine moves back to the Yellow River region and the Monguor in Gansu - the "Turco-Mongol Buddhists in Northwestern China," as the chapter's subtitle classifies them.<sup>1</sup> The chapter opens with the observation of clothing often preserving older designs that disappear elsewhere in the material culture of a given group. It is thus through garments and embroidery that Gonick arrives at the recognition that the Monguor tradition carries a close affinity with the Kyoto textiles.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, their Tibetan Buddhist monastic architecture carries on ancient Uighur traits to the present-day. Interesting as the chapter is, the text is also very impressionistic.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter Ten takes the reader back to Japan and to another formal analysis of the Kyoto ink-painted woolen tapestries, which were discussed in Chapter Four in some detail. The pile rugs, however, are not revisited.

In Chapter Eleven, the Chinese painted tapestries produced in Jiangnan and the southeastern coast down to Fujian from the twelfth to twentieth century are touched upon. This sweep in time and space features much piecemeal information, but the overall view is that the Uighur weavers' ink painting and block printing techniques in producing the textiles remained, but the decoration and themes changed from Manichaeism to almost exclusively Daoist over the course of time.

Intriguingly, too, while the movement of textile workers with a Uighur background on the whole was from northwestern and northern China to Jiangnan and the southeastern coastal areas, Gonick also mentions Monguor who migrated back to Qinghai from Jiangnan in the Ming Dynasty. Presumably they may have been Manicheans to

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<sup>1</sup> Gonick (2016:104).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of Monguor textile tradition and embroideries, see Pullinen (2015).

<sup>3</sup> A wavering quality, repetitiveness, and lack of fully thought-out structure become more apparent in later chapters - they would have benefitted from further editing.

whom the distant Gansu offered more freedom and less danger of religious persecution by the new Chinese rulers.

Here Gonick charts both temporal and geographical moves in terms of the production of Manichean art and artifacts in China, and of the people making them.

Chapter Twelve presents the conclusions of the study in eleven points. These concisely recap the pivotal arguments and evidence with clarity in support of Gonick's theory identifying the source of the Kyoto textiles in northwest China's Gansu and Qinghai provinces along the eastern leg of the Silk Road. Ten of the points relate to the tapestries and sum up relevant facts regarding materials, manufacture, design, and function. One point (8) deals with the export and movement of the pieces that conveyed them to Japan. Another (10) discusses what Gonick terms "splinter production," referring to the migrant Uighur textile production in Jiangnan and the southeastern coast between the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and Minguo (the Republican period, 1912-1949).

The final point (11) concludes with regard to the audience carpets made by the Monguor in the Yellow River region for use as sitting carpets for high lamas (so-called "Living Buddhas").

But the book does not end here. Instead, there is a final chapter (13) - actually an afterword by a different author - introducing paintings in Upper Wutun Monastery, near Rebkong (Tongren) in Qinghai Province, and in so doing provides an example of the Rebkong school of Tibetan Buddhist art, believed varying to date back to the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

This final tangent presents a puzzle – why is it there?

Its author, John E Hatherley, offers as *raison d'être* his view that "Rebkong pictorial art and the Buddhist art of the Amdo region are fascinating subjects that warrant further detailed study" (159). While this is a valid point, I am unconvinced that the closing pages of Gonick's book are the right platform for Hatherley's call for such attention. These paintings have little to do with Gonick's lines of argument or her own remarks about the monastery, and even less with



the textiles she seeks to fathom. In short, Chapter Thirteen would have been best left out.

Since it nonetheless is part of the book, I will offer a few thoughts. Its key assertion would seem to be its opening line of reasoning:

Although the paintings at Upper Wutun Monastery shown in chapters Seven and Nine appear in a Monguor temple and the Monguor were once Manichaeans, by the time these were painted the populace thought of themselves as Tibetan Buddhist and they were painted to honor Tibetan Buddhist deities (157).

Gonick touches on Upper Wutun Monastery and Chapter Seven contains a single drawing (7.20) depicting Manichaean-style Crosses of Light found on the temple. Chapter Nine includes photographs of the monastery precincts (9.24) and a further image of a temple doorway (9.25) that is vague in terms of the point that is intended. Most of the photographs (9.28-9.35) present various aspects of a typical Tibetan-style temple edifice in the region. Only 9.36 shows again the Manichaean-style crosses as part of the temple's ornamental bracketing (*dougong*).

However, Gonick's text is in some ways more illuminating about her arguments than any of the images, when she writes:

There is much confusion and little documentation as to what degree of assimilation actually went on in the Mongol-Uyghur communities. However, it is irrefutable that Uyghur stylish traits and Uyghur Manichaean motifs are ubiquitous on Monguor [...] temple architecture to the present time (112).

And that "[a]lthough most of the Monguor people profess Tibetan Buddhism, it seems that Manichaean concepts have nevertheless survived underground in a small percentage of the population" (113).

Both statements appear to be somewhat at odds with Hatherley's claims.

As I have noted elsewhere, while the notion of seemingly unchanging cultural traditions may be questioned, it is also important to question change and examine the ways in which, at different times and under different circumstances, it occurs.<sup>1</sup> Upper Wutun Monastery provides an intriguing case in point.<sup>2</sup> But the critical question - to what extent the ancient Uighur Manichaeian beliefs and artistic traditions may have survived, in however much reconfigured guises - is likely to remain beyond definite answer.

In that light, there remains one other possibility: that by way of incorporating the final chapter, Gonick elegantly acknowledges the fact of the Tibetan Buddhist dominance prevailing in the area, despite her own interests in searching for any Manichaeian traces lingering in the local communities.

I close my review with final remarks in relation to the book in its entirety. Gonick's arguments are well and extensively presented in the early chapters. The provenance in China is convincingly argued for, and Manichaeism as religion and original context for the pieces is discussed in rich detail. Following Chapter Six, there are a number of parts that provide the data and examples for the arguments already presented, without adding much new information, except in terms of visual images. As noted earlier, the book is lavishly and excellently illustrated.

On a more personal note, as Philip Glazebrook has so perceptibly observed: "Very little of the mystery of a place or an idea

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<sup>1</sup> Komppa (2010:258).

<sup>2</sup> Wutun Shang Si 'Upper Wutun Monastery' was established in 1648. Lower Monastery dates originally from 1381. However, Upper Monastery was burnt in 1946 and subsequently restored in 1949. More damage occurred in 1958. Lower Monastery was partially rebuilt and restored in 1981. No exact information is given for Upper Monastery. Both monasteries were opened to visitors (tourists) in 1987 (PRHA 1898, Pu 1990:434-435). The Upper Monastery has undergone significant renovation, for instance, in the early 2010s. Consequently, the contemporary Upper Monastery edifice is not very old.

survives the scrutiny required to sort out and put into words what was it about that mystery sufficiently intriguing to have compelled you to write about it" (1985:171). His reflection finely captures the accomplishment of Gloria Gonick's book. She has taken on a fascinating, if obscure and little studied subject, and while unfolding the true identity and the changing context and meanings of these textiles, replaced much of the mystery surrounding them with knowledge based on well-reasoned arguments and candid fieldwork. As such, despite certain shortcomings,<sup>1</sup> *Early Carpets and Tapestries on the Eastern Silk Road* is a fine piece of scholarly detection, and merits careful reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Outright errors include two maps of China that both misplace and misspell several locations. Map 9.2 (106) gives both Xiahe and Labrang as two distinctly different sites, which is not only superfluous, but also places them geographically the wrong way around in relation to one another. On the same map, the spelling of 'Taklaan Lhamo' is a curious choice: as opposed to either Taktsang Lhamo (for correctness) or Langmusi (for clarity and consistency). Map 11.2 (136) contains more serious errors: both Shanghai and Ningbo are quite out of place; the two Hangzhou are very confusing - the one in Fujian surely being actually Fuzhou, while the correct Hangzhou in Zhejiang is somewhat off the mark. These, however, do not diminish the importance of Gonick's book.

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Bezeklik 柏孜克里千佛洞

*dougong* 斗拱

Dunhuang 敦煌

Fujian 福建

Fuzhou 福州

Gansu 甘肃

Jiangnan 江南

Langmusi/Taksang Lhamo 郎木寺, stag tshang lha mo ལྷ་ཚང་ལྷ་མོ།

Luqu 碌曲

Ming 明

Minguo 民国

Monguor 蒙古尔

Ningbo 宁波

Qin'an 秦安

Qing 清

Qinghai 青海

Shanghai 上海

Song 宋

Tianshui 天水

Tongren/Rebkong 同仁, reb gong རེབ་གོང་།

Turfan 吐鲁番

Wutun Shangsì 五屯上寺

Xiahe 夏河, Labrang, bla brang bkra shis 'khyil ལྷ་བླ་བླ་བླ་མེས་འབྲེལ།

Xicang Si 西仓寺

Xinjiang 新疆

Zhejiang 浙江

Zhuoni/Chone 卓尼, co ne ཙོ་ནེ།